



Mobile media challenging status quo

Smartphones, social media and the Occupy-movement

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Publication date:
2013

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Sandvik, K. (2013). *Mobile media challenging status quo: Smartphones, social media and the Occupy-movement*. Paper presented at NORDMEDIA, Oslo, Norway.

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Mobile Media challenging status quo: smartphones, social media and the *Occupy Wall Street*-movement

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This paper sketches out a study of the *Occupy Wall Street*-movement as an example on how mobile and networked media and especially smartphones in combination with social media services may rock the status quo of today's global power structures (or at least propose an alternative agenda to the existing capitalist one) putting to use the media's potential for participation and thus civic engagement on the one hand and its modes of communication through network structures on the other and thus – along with a variety of both historical and socio-political conditions – both enabling and shaping the protests against the financial powers of the world and their role in the global financial crisis. The paper demonstrates how the format of mobile media and social media services is woven into the very fabric of the movement and the way it organizes its members and activities.

As pointed out by the research project *Meaning Across Media* (Sandvik et.al. 2012-2015), the vast spread of the internet and mobile media over the last two decades has generated great hopes and deep worries – in public debate as well as in research. To one side, Jenkins (2006) and Benkler (2006) represent what critics may call an utopian view of a *participatory culture* in which everybody will be not just famous for fifteen minutes, but exposed and active 24/7 in a setting characterized by *collective intelligence* and *wisdom of crowds*: an “utopianism of social network theory: the romantic notion of social networks in the new media culture” (Bondebjerg 2010) . Following the optimistic line of argument it might be claimed that “new digital media culture has transformed the everyday life of our communicative culture” granting “access to global digital archives and services: “googling reality” and the world close at hand” thus “boosting instant global communication and network functions” and in doing so “lowering costs and making user-made content possible” (ibid.). To the other side, Andrew Keen (2007) has expounded a dystopian perspective on a *cult of the amateur* in which standards of scientific and aesthetic quality come to be disregarded – a setting in which everybody is talking and no one is listening.

Digital media and especially so-called ‘social media’ (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube being among the most prominent so far) have, on the one hand, been ascribed the power to change societies and empower democratic movements, following the thinking of, e.g., Howard Rheingold (2004). This position has recently been fueled by movements like Occupy Wall Street as

well as the democratic uprisings in Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Iran and Libya that created headlines like ‘the Facebook revolution.’ On the other hand, scholars have argued that it is naive to believe that social media in themselves create change: they may at best facilitate existing social and political movements (Downing 2008, Christakis & Fowler 2010). Internet sociologists such as Morozov (2011) point out that the same media which were used to mobilize the ‘Twitter revolution’ in Iran in 2009 (Mortensen 2011) also were used by the regime to infiltrate and strike down this democratic movement.

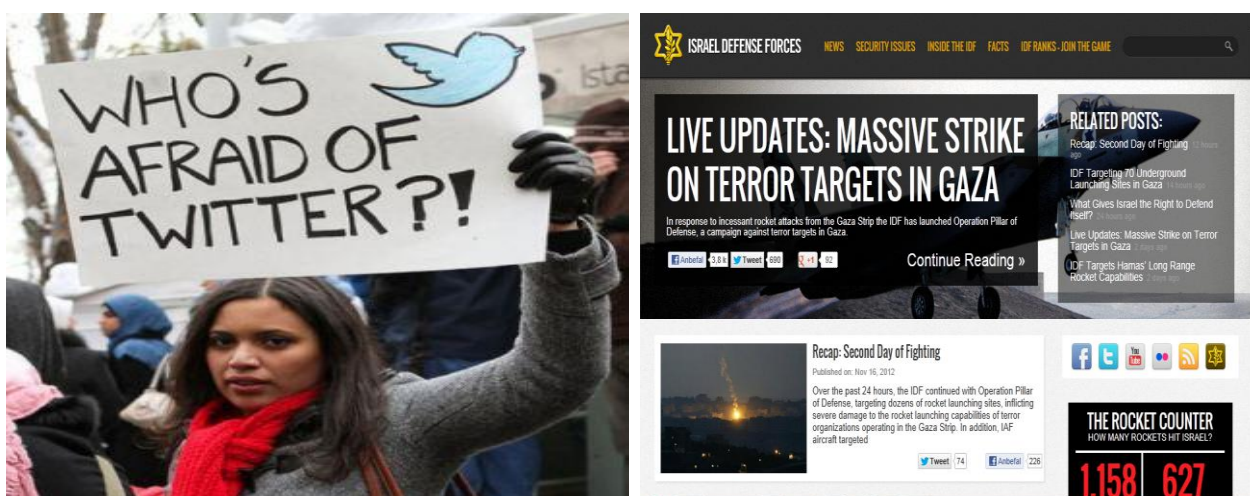
This position will claim that new media are neither the solution to the problems nor the decline of culture and communication as we know it. Even though it might be said that digital media – and especially mobile and networked communication devices equipped with tools for producing both text and images and with social network services enabling sharing and rapid spreadability have changed the role of e.g. newsmedia going from centralized gatekeeping to open access and new online democratic voices (Bruns 2005), we still see old agendas dominating despite the new media, we still see old power structures at work, which even Jenkins has admitted:

Not all participants are created equal. Corporations - and even individuals within corporate media - still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others (Jenkins 2006, s. 3)

Even in the age of campaigners and protesters putting on the role as citizen journalists equipped with smartphones and organizing as well as reporting through Twitter and Facebook, stories tend to become news stories only when they are remediated in traditional news media such as TV and newspapers, and even large scale mobilizations such as Occupy Wall Street is affected by the way in which news media write about them for instance “characterized by a dismissive generational frame through the use of spectacle, irony, and a marginalization of OWS voices” (Reyes 2013).

This paper will - following the lines of the Meaning Across Media project - seek to find a middle-ground between utopia and dystopia: asking new questions in order to see the connections and relations between political uprisings and social movements and mobile and networked communication technology. Whether or not we believe that smartphones and social media have an affect or constitute a driving force in the various democratic movements in the world, it can’t be disregarded that they are in the center of the action and seemingly playing an

important role. This was for instance the case with the capture and execution of Libyan dictator Gaddafi (Kristensen & Mortensen forthcoming), which was caught on rebel soldiers' mobile phone cameras and distributed on Facebook and Twitter and from there, fed into the traditional circuits of the news media. As such smartphones and social media are intertwined with the movements of the Arab Spring challenging and rebelling against established regimes. Their use of media may be called a weaponization of social media (and importantly this use of services like Twitter is not only for the rebels, it is also a weapon in the hand of the reigning powers. As such Twitter has been put to use on both sides in the ongoing Gaza conflict. And furthermore smartphones, Facebook, Twitter and the like is the communicational backbone in the Occupy movement from its origin in Manhattan and the initial camping-out campaign in Zucotti Park near Wall Street to its viral spread throughout the Western world. Here media does not play a role as a strategic (or military) weapon in the same way as in the Arab Spring uprisings. Still the media are being utilized in fulfilling the Occupy agenda of destabilizing and/or distorting and setting new agendas.



Occupy Wall Street may serve as an example – despite the criticism put forth in the beginning of this paper – on how social media with its democratic potential and its modes of communication through network structure, both enables and shapes the protests against the financial powers of the world and their role in the global financial crisis. The main characteristics of social media are the same as the ones defining Occupy.

In this line of argument we may regard smartphones and social media as media of change with its origin in web 2.0 media technologies as *architectures of participation* affording radical possibilities for dialogic processes, for collaboration, participation and co-creation. Thus these media suggest communication as dynamic processes with lesser focus on fixed solutions than on changeable, adaptive and user-centered solutions. The characteristic – the open and customizable architecture – of the smartphone enable uses of web 2.0 apps and services mashups, that is, combinations of freeware or cheap, effective and constantly updated and improved media technology which make the smartphone into a dynamic and reconfigurable media affording a perpetual beta and long-tailed way of communication which suit the dynamic and reconfigurable nature of the Occupy movement. As such Occupy realizes – to some degree – the vision put forth by Rheingold (2004) of a *rapid response-culture*, *ad hoc-culture*, with mobile media enhanced *smart mobs* creating a social revolution. In Rheingold's definition smart mobs are self-organized and independent groups in which communication flows in (for the law and enforcement) uncontrollable patterns due to the use of mobile and networked media for mobilizing, organizing and directing demonstrations. The media enables the smart mob to mobilize through the mediated networks in order to be at the right place at the right time, and to organize and reorganize rapidly.

Off course mobilizing through mobile media is not something entering our world with by-and-by smarter mobile communication devices. Mobile radio equipment has been used in mobilizing tropes in every war throughout the last century or so. Film nerds will be familiar with *Convoy* in which Kris Kristofferson in the role as truck driver Rubber Duck mobilizes his fellow truck drivers by use of the radio transmitter in a convoy towards a tyrant sheriff. However, both the military radio and the one used in trucks are highly sophisticated systems which demand expert knowledge – as well as e.g. a truck – in order to be useful and mobile. What characterizes the communicational devices residing in our pockets is and what makes them effective tools for mobilizing and protesting is 1) the speed with which the communication can be spread (the quality of networked communication); 2) the availability of the ones being communicated with (the quality of online-ness); 3) the usability (the quality of non-expert systems), and finally 4) the mobility and possibilities of directing (the quality of navigation and positioning).

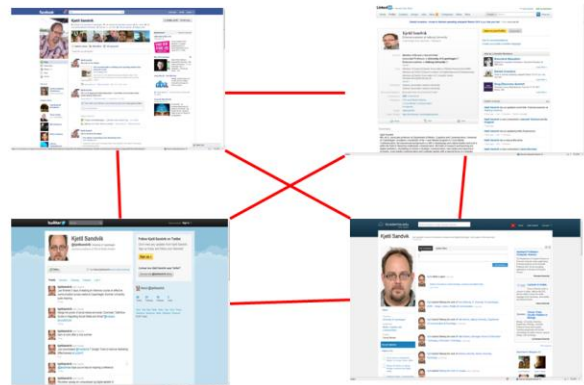


Comparing the use of mobile and networked communication devices and social media in the uprisings in Egypt, Libya and so on and the Occupy movement, the role of the media has changed from being a tool for rebelling to being a tool for destabilizing. But what they have in common is a belief that the new media actually change the power structures also when it comes to creation and distribution of information. When looking at how imagery and texts circulates on social networks it becomes evident that the established media are not anymore uncontested playing a role as centralized gate keepers: they are challenged by new media circuits characterized by to open access and new online democratic voices. Even though they still play a crucial role and it can be argued that events still do not become news before they have entered the circuits of e.g. TV, broadcast media are no longer setting the agenda without competition. The ideology fueling this perception of new media is that information cannot be controlled as before due to open access (p2p), file sharing, hacking (Wikileaks is an emblematic example of this logic, the same is Wikiopedia as an embodiment of the idea of media affording collective intelligence and wisdom of crowds). Following this line of thought, Occupy may be understood as a movement defined and shaped by social media logic: the movement is open, networked, user-driven, its primary modus operandi is collaboration, participation, and co-creation. The movement is basically dynamic, long-tailed, perpetual beta-structured. The following series of pictures show to what degree the organization of Occupy and its activities are shaped and directed by the characteristics and affordances of mobile networked communication technology and social media, emblematic in the use of the hash-tag in the initial call for action signifying the viral and searchable nature of a movement conducted in realtime, mobilized online and offline, and existing in actual and virtual space (Grusin 2010)



Launched through Twitter

Driven by networked/networking users



So, summing up: what Occupy movement is about is now necessarily to overthrow the existing regime (contrary to the Arab Spring uprisings). The main goal seem to be to create new democratic modes of debating, discussing, protesting – through (amongst others) innovative use of smartphones and social media. Its characteristics are openness (floating signifiers?), agenda-suggesting and agenda-making strategies rather than agenda-fulfilling ones: One of the movement's credos is 'you do not need to have an answer before you act!'. Occupy is not necessarily anti-capitalist, but it represents a will to debate and criticize the capitalist system, its institutions and logics: occupying discourse! And it does so by applying the modes of communication embedded in social media: collaboration, participation and co-creation. The effect may be long-termed, it may come in the shape of new democratic initiatives focused on e.g. crowd sourcing, collective intelligence etc.

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